WHY PROGRESSIVES AND LEFTISTS NEEDED TO WEAR A MASK SINCE YESTERDAY

I can now say, year four into the C19 pandemic, that I've had enough conversations with supposed progressives and revolutionaries about the importance of masking. Person after person, always the same talking points, always the same polite concern followed with dismissal and apathy. I am one of many who are tired of people not being honest with themselves and not committing to their claimed values. These conversations have become so repetitive, so artificial that I resort to typing my own automatic response to common talking points rather than wasting my time doing one-on-one. It should concern all anti-capitalists that, when confronted about masking and accessibility, visibly fall back on the same replies as right-wingers. While the latter may sound more crude and unapologetic, the premises are identical.

It is crucial to self-reflect on one's own actions and whether they align with one's values, because so many have tolerated cognitive dissonances and let them translate into material harm. Some have chosen it knowingly, which begs the question of how serious an individual is about the human rights and liberation of all peoples.

1. But we are social creatures, we have to see each other's faces.

Many essential settings don't carry a social cost to wearing a mask, namely places like malls, grocery shops, public transit, pharmacies, movie theaters, concerts, conferences and clinics. A vast majority of activities can be carried out with a mask across the face. It makes sense to become a link in the chain to block transmission wherever possible, to protect the wellbeing of performers and workers. Any human being is vulnerable to Covid-19, some are simply more vulnerable, but this virus and its long-term effects don't discriminate.

It's an arbitrary decision to claim being entitled to showing your face to anyone and everyone, wherever, and that it's a necessary criteria for socializing. Masks and socializing are not mutually exclusive and can often make socializing safer for people who deserve to be included as much as you. Maskless gatherings can be done privately with consent from the ones attending. The risk of exposure in public spaces should be reduced to the maximum, to the point where infection almost relates to bad luck out of respect for people's bodily autonomy and health. A part of having a vibrant community is looking out for each other and enabling access to spaces for all. What needs to be done is prioritizing lives over "vibes" and re-centering our ways of bonding together beyond the scope of excessive consumerism.

2. High-risk people can wear a mask if they want.

Mask media filters up to 98% of particles. More often than not, one-way masking with a quality respirator will prevent infection in social settings even in the face of contagious people, but it has limits. This performance tanks if the mask isn't perfectly fitted to the wearer's face, simply because air follows the path of least resistance. You give it gaps, it'll pass through the gaps and the bigger they are, the more leakage. This disingenuous talking point flies in the face of high-risk people often not having access to fit-testing to achieve a perfect seal or the financial capacity to consistently buy respirators. It places the burden of protection on vulnerable people and voluntarily shuts out the notion of solidarity, which in this case would translate into two-way masking to fix the main limitation of one-way masking.

Airborne viruses behave similarly to cigarette smoke. The limitation with a perfectly sealed respirator, when only the wearer is masking, is what I call the hotbox effect. Aerosols accumulate in an unventilated room with time, so having a contagious source in the room with a masked high-risk person inside whose presence is required is a real risk especially when they can't choose when to leave. At that point, a minimum 2% of leakage over time turns into inhaling an infectious dose. The same applies to a ventilated room where the vulnerable person is sitting next to a contagious source for hours. The proximity trumps ventilation, because that's where the aerosols are the most concentrated.

3. We have to take into consideration the comfort and freedom of others.

This is antithetical to collective care notions that are supposed to be at the heart of progressive and revolutionary ideologies. Freedom has its limits when the autonomy of one can result in death or long-term disability (or worsening one's condition) of another. The idea that masks are uncomfortable is also arbitrary, because on these grounds, we should have waged war against heels, bras and costumes, and yet many choose to wear such things for hours at a time. Regardless, keeping each other healthy is far more comfortable than managing chronic illness and having to endure invasive medical interventions after no one bothered to use prevention tools.

Some may say that it's important to host a group discussion over it and not impose masks on people, because it's undemocratic. That in itself is not a bad point, but I'd argue that people's right to health and access to public spaces being on the table for a vote is a slippery slope. I would imagine it's a no-brainer for progressives and leftists if we convene that masking saves lives. I'd also invite people to wonder what valid reasons are there to not wear a mask around

crowds, indoors, and when organizing for people's livelihoods. You may be fine with the risk, but the line should be drawn at imposing that risk onto others if we're going to talk about comfort and freedom.

This is an airborne pandemic, and we don't have the luxury of private air. The tolerance of viral spread under the guise of personal freedoms is not a victimless approach, both from an individual and group perspective.

4. I don't have to wear a mask if we ventilate/stand outside/have air purifiers.

No high-end filtration, ventilation and UVC radiation in the world can prevent transmission between two people standing in each other's faces, especially since talking and shouting generates more aerosols. In that scenario, the uninfected person inhales it faster than the aerosols can be diluted, captured or inactivated. Currently, masks are the only close-range transmission tool we have. Close-range transmission outdoors as the dominant factor is documented and proven, both through simulation and case studies and through the finding of viral reservoirs in wild deer populations. It goes without saying that these animals didn't get infected at an unventilated restaurant. Still don't believe me? You can always deck a small room with those layers and test your impression with a sick friend.

Of course, some public space scenarios are safer. Outdoors is good, but when in a crowd or at a protest, the proximity trumps the open air. The idea is to recognize the occasions where close-range transmission is a notable factor and take the correct measure. Ideally, the layers of source control are a package deal, yet masks as a standalone measure will always be more efficient at prevention than other layers on their own.

5. You only go on and on about covid-19 and nothing else. Other issues also need attention!

The climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic are the two most urgent matters and are unique in the sense that they can't wait for a revolution. Every day that passes without actions taken wherever and whenever possible, on any scale, means more deaths and suffering. Only one of those two however is receiving adequate public attention. The other one is being ignored or downplayed by people who claim to have a grasp on solidarity, who claim to work through the symptoms of capitalism all the while doing nothing to prevent a virus that exacerbates all those issues in *irreversible* ways. I will naturally focus on the one being neglected regardless of the eye rolls it generates. There is no shortage of sources discussing any other topics you may want to hear about, so I fail to see where the problem lies.

Moreover, we cannot fight back if too many of us end up sick or dying. We cannot wait for a revolution. Rather, we must make the revolution through these challenges and by uplifting the communities we seek to liberate. Capitalism or not, both crises need immediate action, and both can be mitigated at the same time. Covid-19 is unique in the sense that its existing control measures require daily, minimal effort, no matter how one tries to spin the situation.

6. When we topple capitalism, this will be fixed.

Why let an excessive amount of people suffer in the meantime when we can voluntarily mask up and have control over who we can spread it to when we step into public spaces? This sounds a lot like deflecting collective responsibility. How can disabled people trust that we will act right one distant day if we admit we won't adopt the proper habits now even though we can? How can disabled people trust an organization that endorses this approach and, in these conditions, why do we continue to expect disabled workers to jump over these arbitrary barriers to contribute to a group of people that seemingly has no intention of making it safe for them to do so? How does that approach correspond to the leftist idea of unity and fairness?

Being anti-covid is as much part of the class struggle as the right to housing, food and education is. In fact, it is the battle in which individual action is the most determining factor in community spread, as are the vast majority of infectious diseases. Mask mandates end up enforcing individual action, therefore it doesn't hold good to be favorable to mandates as someone who doesn't currently mask. More importantly, we cannot let out of our sight the knowledge that if we keep this up, dead comrades won't be able to enjoy the victory of revolution. We are already losing an unconscionable amount of people. In comparison, nobody says "it can wait" when discussing food or housing insecurity. Instead, we do what we can to alleviate pain, providing goods and financial help to those in need despite still being under capitalism. It only consistent to act the same for a disease.

7. Whatever I do individually doesn't matter as long as there are no upstream actions and reforms.

It's only human to be prone to defeatism and wanting to deflect the part we play in a situation of this magnitude, I get it. But change in a pandemic starts with one another, whether the

government has abandoned us or not. If you can, individually or as a group, prevent contamination on your premises and keep the comrades and friends in your settings from getting infected, why let masking remain optional? Covid-19's ability to put any worker out of commission isn't fiction. Current vaccines don't have proven effects against viral persistence in the organs (as determined by autopsies and stool samples) or T-cell exhaustion, just to name a few possible outcomes of infection. The growing amount of people of all ages and vaccination statuses disabled by Long Covid demonstrates that, especially when taking reinfection and mutations into account.

There is a false construct that as long as Covid-19 doesn't kill you, it'll be good. That is not the case. Disability is the main impact of this virus, and I am baffled at people's ongoing inability to understand that death isn't the only devastating outcome.

8. We can't wear a mask forever. What did high-risk people do before 2020, anyways?

Folks adapt as circumstances change, and I've seen people struggling with this once-familiar concept since the pandemic was declared. Never in our lifetimes had there been a comparable situation at any point, and never had there been an airborne, widespread, biosafety-level 3 pathogen that everybody decided to blind themselves to. The air around us was never so likely to cause long-term damage due to other people deflecting their own responsibility. Just breathing next to another maskless customer in line may have life-altering consequences.

SARS-Cov-2 is more contagious than its predecessor, SARS-Cov-1 (higher affinity with our ACE2 receptors in the body). And it most certainly is not the common flu judging by the mortality and morbidity difference between the two.

When measles was around, which is also a highly contagious airborne virus that can leave survivors with issues like immune amnesia, it annually killed 400-500 people in the United States before vaccines. Just to give you an idea of how much we have normalized mass death and disability, Covid-19 kills on average 1000 Americans in a week according to the CDC, and it's likely an undercount due to neglected morbidity fatalities.

Some are making it out to look like consistent mask mandates for public settings is "forever", without any nuance. Remove it a moment when it's necessary or appropriate, then put it back on if you're regaining the public setting. No need to complicate it.

9. But nobody else is wearing a mask around me. No one cares.

I would expect progressives and leftists to know better than to use this justification. Surely, one can't make a mistake if they're following the crowd. We totally didn't get punked with the Spanish flu, cigarette smoke and HIV, no. The government can't be trusted on any matter except this one, and as the idea of hyper-individualism was largely reviled by anti-capitalists, it was somehow accepted when it was offered in the context of a contagious disease, not even repackaged as a ruse. That's a sound, well-developed analysis.

I also have a hard time seriously considering risk assessments of folks who don't know what the general rate of Long Covid is now (≈10-20%, so about 1 in 10 to 1 in 5 infections), and how that illness can manifest itself. That crowd will not stop to help you when C19 affects your life significantly. You may be forgotten the same way disabled people are currently treated as an afterthought and a burden, so be mindful of the standard you advocate for. None of this is pleasant to hear and digest, but I prefer your discomfort to the material harm of your ignorance.

And if you want to know just how much people become unreliable so they can fit in with the mass, look no further than the smoky room experiments and the Asch conformity experiments.

10. Disabled people can participate online or come with their mask. We should offer them work-from-home options so they don't need to be in risky places.

Inclusion means more than exploring all the options that are not inconvenient to the empowered group or individual. It also doesn't mean picking off the portion of high-risk people who go out without a mask or who accepted the current conditions at the detriment of those who want reasonable accommodations. Not all disabled people have solidarity, the same way not all gay people or all black people will agree on their perceived level of discrimination. I don't believe it should be anyone's freedom to corner a demographic to stay home more because they don't want to mask, and especially by the way of selectively upholding some members of the community in question.

This further normalizes greater barriers to all kinds of jobs that people with disabilities might have occupied pre-pandemic, life choices such as teachers, healthcare providers, performers, public speakers, etc.

Two-way masking grants accessibility to all people across the health spectrum. For an increasing amount of the population, avoiding Covid-19 is a matter of life and death, in more ways than one.

11. Masking is not eco-friendly.

Consider first the ecological weight of regular masking compared to increased usage of pill bottles, packaging, doctor visits and hospitalization waste for chronically ill people who also should be masking on top of that. I'll add that Canada Strong is a company that installed a mask recycling program. A similar program is also implemented in schools and can be upscaled.

If we can agree that corporations are the biggest polluters on the planet, this argument doesn't stand to reason. Human needs that change with the environment are not what's incompatible here, particularly when we find ways to optimize waste reduction at the various stages of production while also cutting down on the consumption of other products.

If waste is the only concern left, there are elastomeric masks like Breathe99, Envomask, Airgami, Airpop or Flomask that are reusable. Disposable ones can have a longer life if you store them in a box or ziploc bag with a humidity packet. It can go up to 40 hours of use and works well in rotation with several masks. All this doesn't exclude the possibility of better models and concepts in the future.

12. Yeah, but you're kind of extreme on this stuff.

I assumed we recognized that neutrality only benefits oppressors. We are living in extreme times, last I checked, and denialism or indifference will get us nowhere. I will not be passive about patients being infected with Covid-19 for seeking healthcare and I will certainly not be passive about a comrade being infected at a protest, which can either end up with them unable to work enough to earn a living or will similarly affect someone downstream in the chain of infection. Again, how can progressives and radicals accept that happening on their grounds, at their events, among their members? Which friends and organizers will be there to support the sick once the damage is done?

You are not entitled to feeling validated by peers in your decision to expose the people around you, should you be pre-symptomatic, rather than masking where it's appropriate.

On behalf of the marginalized who are trying to exist, I will not be nice. This is not an "agree to disagree" issue. Folks are being made homeless due to Long Covid or it's costing them thousands of dollars in healthcare. Some are turning to MAID, and it should raise alarms that the service is being expanded during a pandemic. Millions of orphans worldwide. The

California supreme court ruled that employers cannot be sued over infecting their workers, meaning that the two plaintiffs whose spouses respectively ended up on a ventilator and died lost. The court declared they were correct, and that they had been infected at work, but it has admitted that the economic precedent of this is unfathomable, because it would make every employer a defendant.

Now, can someone clarify why companies and hospitals need Covid-19 liability protection if it's no big deal? They're telling you who they are in plain sight, please recognize it.

Shortly after that ruling, the In-N-Out chain banned masking for their workers in five states. The New York governor is discussing banning masks inside stores. I will not be passive about the escalations. I will not be lukewarm about collapsing public health, worker burnout and ER closures, and I will continue to view those who choose to act like this is not a major labor rights violation as unserious. At this rate, who will be left standing to complete this revolution?

13. My friends who work in healthcare say it's over or no use.

Healthcare providers are humans first and susceptible to the same biases you are. They may be saying something to reassure themselves, may be lying or may have been deceived by officials who lied to them. As long as they don't provide the information to justify their perspective, I wouldn't feel settled.

Historically, it was healthcare providers who rejected and institutionalized Semmelweis, the Hungarian doctor who maintained that handwashing reduces patient mortality. Doctors used to smoke in their offices and pose for cigarette ads well after the scientific consensus on the causal link with lung cancer was established. It was the medical establishment that misled the public about HIV and allowed preventable harm through "belief perseverance". Between all of those developments, there were doctors and nurses who passively let it happen or didn't care to really know. And healthcare providers aren't relevant authorities on transmission and proper mask use. That is the realm of aerosol scientists and engineers.

14. We all die of something, anyway.

I'm not sure how technical I need to get with this one, it's sad how little care people who say this have left for their comrades, how the doomerism has gotten a deep grip. At that point, it doesn't explain how dying from a manageable virus is okay in a revolutionary's mind but not

from capitalism, which requires a longer, more arduous struggle. Both thoughts don't mix well.

I question the commitment of folks who capitulate in front of a situation that is, although particularly urgent, easier to fix. It casts doubt on the ability to contribute to more complex crises like food insecurity and climate disaster when the individual decided to throw people under the bus already (the situation being transmission in leftist gatherings and leftist individuals themselves when navigating in public). Masking up in this context alone can result in a whole chain of transmission wiped off the map, likely dozens of people removed from exposure, and far more if the source space is a group event.

Those numbers are nothing to scoff at. Just because it's not the systemic shift we want to see doesn't mean it's the green light to add to the problem, and make no mistake: not masking does exactly that; there is no neutral stance. Refuting it is refuting the modes of transmission, the fact that it's still circulating and the efficacy of masks.

People struggle with the notion that actions have ramifications, unseen or not, and that somehow they're magically the only person whose decisions didn't contribute to the ever-growing C19 body count.

Reader, if you came down with it today, how many people do you estimate you exposed in the last few days knowing that C19 is contagious before symptoms? How many will the contaminated folks expose in addition to that?

Conclusion

No meaningful progress occurs when we don't confront uncomfortable realities. We've been warned about climate collapse, knew about corruption, and many people have developed organizing strategies but were never prepared for a pandemic. It's the pesky element no one wants to deal with, but sitting idle will not be enough. Somewhere along the lines, people came to believe that a revolution can be ethically conducted and achieved while telling the sick and dying that they can wait, when in fact simple instruments are readily available.

This letter was not supposed to cast blame. But it would be unconscionable not to call out harmful behaviors. Stand up to fellow comrades, challenge this halfhearted resistance to a basic act of care in your circle, control what's in your power and uphold the full meaning of anti-capitalist values. There is no genuine social justice if it doesn't intersect disability justice with anti-imperialism, racial justice, gender inequality and LGBTQ rights.

More reading :

https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/why-has-the-left-deprioritized-covid

https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/03/23/ljwc-m23.html

https://www.okdoomer.io/a-covid-faq-with-300-sources/

https://xtramagazine.com/health/covid-pandemic-precautions-queer-community-241825